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SUBJECT: PRT WASIT HOSTS MAJOR AGRICULTURAL CONFERENCE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: PRT Wasit on June 20-21 hosted a major agricultural conference in al-Kut. The conference brought together Council of Representatives (CoR) members, ministry officials, provincial officials, subject matter experts and local farmers to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Wasit,s flagging agricultural economy and develop an action plan to help move the Province forward. A plenary session on the conference,s second day identified potential solutions to problem areas such as water usage and availability, energy shortfalls and bureaucratic mismanagement. A Steering Committee was formed, chaired by an influential member of the COR, with a mandate to develop emergency measures to tackle the most pressing problems as well as a plan to address medium- and long-term goals. The committee will convene for the first time in early July. Finally, the PRT,s use of facilitated groups, and training of PRT personnel to act as small group facilitators, was successful and might be profitably employed elsewhere in Iraq. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Wasit Province, once commonly referred to as the &breadbasket of Iraq,8 has experienced a sharp decline in agricultural productivity in recent years. Since 2000, productivity has declined approximately 45-50%, fueling a self-reinforcing cycle of unemployment, abandoned farmland, poverty and economic insecurity. Poor economic prospects also increase the young population,s susceptibility to extremist rhetoric and have contributed to occasional hostility toward both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Coalition Forces. Reasons for this downturn include declining water resources, poor overall resource management, crumbling physical and human infrastructure, regulatory problems and lack of access to credit. A common thread linking these challenges has been a lack of coordination and communication among the various stakeholders and decision-makers in Wasit,s agricultural economy. Having identified this problem through active outreach among Wasit,s farmers and managers, the PRT hosted a major regional conference June 20-21 designed to bring together\*for the first time\*the Province,s various agricultural leaders with a view toward drafting an Action Plan to stabilize and improve its economy.

A Milestone Meeting  
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¶3. (SBU) The process actually began with a series of three workshops in May and June where U.S. and Iraqi subject matter experts met with representatives from various agricultural sectors, including elected officials, sheiks, ministry officials, financial services representatives and farmers. The workshops not only provided information and training to participants, but also helped form a coherent operational picture of the current agricultural economy and identified themes to be addressed at the larger conference. Workshop

attendance was high, ranging from 35-40 for each session. The workshops also generated positive buzz about the upcoming conference in the agricultural community.

14. (SBU) The two-day conference brought approximately 80 participants together at a hotel in the Provincial capital of al-Kut-- an accomplishment in and of itself that for security reasons would have been impossible just one year ago. Prominent participants included the Governor, the Chair of the Provincial Council, the Sadrist Deputy Governor, Wasit,s largest farmer, and two members of the Council of Representatives: Sheik Jamal Batik and Majid Kharalla. Participants were divided into several small groups headed by QParticipants were divided into several small groups headed by PRT facilitators, and the groups were designed to avoid senior participants from dominating discussions. Over the course of several sessions, participants discussed the strengths and weaknesses of agriculture in Wasit, identified the &advances8 needed for improvement in various sectors, charted obstacles and challenges to these advances, and finally, during a wrap-up plenary session, created an Action Plan and tasked specific individuals and groups for follow-up activity.

#### Strengths, Weaknesses, and a New Steering Committee

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15. (SBU) Discussions identified broad areas of agreement about Wasit,s strengths as an agricultural province. A major river system, fertile soil, long growing season, available workforce, and historic/cultural ties and affinity to agricultural production were among the top characteristics in Wasit,s favor. The challenges to tapping into these resources and turning agriculture around were daunting, however. Above all, irrigation and water resource management was cited as the single greatest problem confronting the Province. Other issues included energy, transfer of technology, credit availability, and animal wealth/husbandry concerns. There was no shortage of ideas about how to address these issues. From green energy technologies like investment in solar and wind energy (in ready supply on the sunny, windswept plains); to alternative irrigation practices like drip irrigation and better enforcement of water-usage regulations; to better training and education for key provincial and local civil servants involved in planning and management, participants agreed on many possible solutions to some of the most pressing issues. What was conspicuously absent was the lack of any organizational structures, public or private, to help initiate such projects and coordinate on a larger scale.

16. (SBU) The plenary group formulated an Action Plan that had as its centerpiece the creation of a Steering Committee (or &crisis cell8) with members drawn from all sectors of Wasit,s agricultural economy. Designed to mirror local structures convened to take quick action during public health emergencies, the committee will be headed by Sheik Batik (COR representative), and include relevant DGs, agricultural experts, the chairman of the Provincial Council,s Agricultural Committee, and farmers. This all-Iraqi committee planned to meet for the first time in early July to draft a list of short-term measures and medium and long-term goals, including coordinated lobbying/advocacy efforts in Baghdad, communication with other Provinces and planning for a Wasit-sponsored regional conference to promote cooperation on water management issues (in particular), and public-private partnerships to work together in other areas. Having hosted the initial meeting and brought the major players together, the PRT will continue to play a consultative role with the committee, but initiatives and actions lie solely with the Iraqis themselves.

#### Best Practice: Facilitated Discussions

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17. (SBU) One of the conference,s successes was the PRT,s use of trained facilitators to encourage group discussions. PRT BBAs and linguists underwent hours of training to learn

techniques designed to draw out participants and help collect and organize feedback. Each facilitator worked with a single group and moved discussions along while still affording ownership of the discussion, and the ideas that were generated, to the Iraqi participants. Although the PRT was unsure how participants would take to the very &American8 techniques, without exception the groups were energetic, lively, and had a high-level of participation from all involved. For more information on the nature of the facilitation, contact Senior Agricultural Advisor Patrick Moore at Patrick.Moore@iraq.centcom.mil

18. (SBU) Comment: Initial feedback from the conference is that a critical mass of concerned stakeholders can be catalyzed ) with the right forum and concepts ) to collaborate and take steps necessary to sustain their good ideas. We are cautiously optimistic that the Iraqi participants appreciated that the PRT,s role was only indirectly supportive and, after a few pointed remarks, accepted that the PRT was not in a position to offer solutions. We will follow up closely to provide logistical and advisory support to the efforts of the &Crisis Cell.8  
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